

Program Notes for June 6, 2009

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From England to Germany and Back Again

Handel as an Axis of Baroque Music in Germany and England

In 2009, Britain is celebrating a convergence of jubilees honoring composers who helped define the sometimes elusive nature of English classical music. It is the two hundred fiftieth anniversary of Handel's death, while Henry Purcell will celebrate his three hundred fiftieth birthday. In addition, two non-English composers closely associated with that nation's classical heritage are having parallel tributes: Joseph Haydn, in the two-hundredth year of his passing; and Felix Mendelssohn, born in that year, 1809.

While the political reach of Britain through dominion was ascendant in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, her primacy in the arts was less assured or consistent than that of her continental neighbors. England's achievement in letters would ultimately be seen as the great succession to the Classical Age; other cultural attainments tended towards more assimilation. For example, England never effectuated the hegemony over music that could match the wealth of musical innovation and genius of Italy, France, and, ultimately, Germany. Britain would wait two hundred fifty years for a musical rebirth; then, and only then, would the names of Thomas Tallis, William Byrd and Henry Purcell be held in synoptic esteem. Before this recent "English Musical Renaissance," George Frideric Handel was the only English musician to be universally regarded as a genius and to bear influence on musical greats to come. Of course, Handel was really a German, born Georg Friedrich Händel; his work had taken root in Hamburg and Italy before he visited, and ultimately settled, in England. Yet, it is impossible to listen to much of Handel without hearing the unmistakable dignity characteristic of English sacred music. Assimilating national styles, in a chameleon-like way, was a hallmark of Handel's genius. He was to draw from seventeenth-century English composers like Henry Purcell as much as he would from German masters such as Zachow and Mattheson. Thus, when Handel composed his eleven *Chandos Anthems* he extended an Anglican form, the "verse anthem," with techniques he drew from German "sacred concerti," creating the quintessential High English Baroque sound.

It is worth noting two distinguishing hallmarks of Baroque music that link earlier masters like Purcell with later ones like Handel and Bach. The first trait is the *basso continuo*, or thorough bass – a bass line that is played with an accompanying instrument (or several) which filled in the intended harmonies. The second characteristic has been called the "concerted style": rather than the continuous flow of counterpoint of the earlier epoch, instrumental and vocal groups were now played or sung in contrasting and alternating ways. Alternation and contrast in color, texture, tempo and mood gave the Baroque its expressive leverage. This latter textural aspect would allow church music to be ultimately wed with multi-movement secular music, as was the case with oratorios and cantatas. Listening to Purcell's "verse" anthem, "Rejoice in the Lord Always," we hear the early influence of this *concertato style* in its contrasting of solo voices and its use of a small instrumental group with choir. The Handel *Chandos Anthems*, written much later, are very nearly miniature oratorios; they are to *Messiah* what Bach's cantatas were to his *St. Matthew Passion*.

We know that after Handel settled in England he became familiar with Purcell's music and Purcell's teacher, John Blow. Another composer whom Handel knew personally while in Germany was his contemporary, Georg Phillip Telemann. The two were life-long friends, and Telemann performed several of Handel's operas when he was director of the Hamburg opera from 1721 until 1738. When one hears Handel's voice in Telemann's mature oboe sonata of 1740, it is both an acknowledgment of their common heritage in German and Italian styles, as well as, most certainly, of Telemann's acquaintance with the younger composer's work.

Purcell *Verse Anthem, "Rejoice in the Lord Always(s)" (c. 1682-1685) Z 49*

A subtle and expressive anthem, drawn from the Philippians 4 vv. 4-7, this verse anthem is scored for alto, tenor and bass solos, four-part choir, strings, organ and continuo. The piece justly lives up to its acquired nickname, "The Bell Anthem": the text entreates praise in a "reverberant" way – an opportunity for Purcell to suggest the repetitive pealing of bells and other iterative motifs. The opening string *sinfonia* has a repeated eight-note descending scale bass line – clearly evoking the peal of carillons; the upper strings partly invert this pattern, suggesting the dissipation of sound heavenward. Purcell furthers this idea of "echoing" by emphasizing the chiasmic form of the text: "Rejoice in the Lord Always and again I say Rejoice," as well as underscoring the words "again I say" with alternating *solis*, choir and string *ritornelli*. The middle section, "Be careful for nothing," is highlighted by the absence of both *ritornelli* and the pronounced triple meter that characterized the opening section. Hence, the touching minimalism in this middle section lends a special piety to his text. Finally, the abbreviated return of the first section clarifies the work's a-b-a' form, which ("again I say") demonstrates Purcell's clever attention to the text's symmetry and reflexivity.

Handel "*Chandos*" Anthems, (1717-1718)

The fabulously wealthy James Brydges, Earl of Carnarvon, Duke of Chandos, lived in an equally fabulous Palladian mansion, "Cannons," near Edgware, northwest of London. The Duke lavished himself with an orchestra, celebrated musicians, and composers. Handel would be in his employ for two years, and wrote, among others, a set of anthems. The eleven works were modestly scored for vocal soloists, choir, oboe, strings and continuo. In only two of the anthems Handel introduced two recorders. All works draw their text either from the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662) or Tate and Brady's *New Version of the Psalms*. In their lack of ostentation, and, indeed, their reserve, they are equipoised to Purcell's choral work and Handel's oratorios.

Chandos Anthem No. 9, O Praise the Lord with One Consent, HWV 254:

Drawn from Psalms 117, 135 and 148 from Tate and Brady, Handel demonstrates his ability to borrow from his own oeuvre. The striking bass aria, #4, "That God is great," was taken from his own "Ode for the Birthday of Queen Anne" of 1713, HWV 74. Perhaps as a playful reference to this borrowing, Handel incorporates another annexation: William Croft's recently composed and very popular "St Anne" ("Our God, Our Help in Ages Past"). The outline of Croft's hymn is heard in the introduction and opening chorus, and is hinted at in the tenor aria #3. The centerpiece, "With cheerful notes let all the earth to heaven their voices raise," is one of Handel's most appealing and beautifully crafted choruses. When "to heaven their voices raise" is sung, the choir sustains a chord on "raise," almost to breathless exhaustion, while the strings waft and exalt the message heavenward.

Chandos Anthem No. 11, Let God Arise, HWV 256a

Drawn from Psalms 68 and 76, Handel opens with *sinfonia*, cast in two distinct sections, the latter quicker and more contrapuntal; a half-cadence with an improvised flourish leads to the first chorus – "Let God arise, and let his enemies be scatter'd." Choppy melismas and passagework depict the scattering of the heathens. Bach was to use a similar idea in his *Magnificat* ("dispersit superbos mente cordis sui"). In a tenor aria, "Like as the smoke vanish," the word painting continues in pairing "vanisheth" and "perish," both of which are followed by extended pauses; vigorous melismas again castigate the ungodly: "thou shall drive them away." The surprisingly plaintive chorus, "O sing unto God," follows a celebratory soprano aria. The complex final chorus is cast in three text sections. "Praised be the Lord," an ethereal and fervent prayer, is intoned mysteriously over slow-moving bass pedal points. Then, in the second section, "At thy rebuke, O God," Handel realistically depicts the falling of "chariot and horse" by wide descending melodic intervals. Finally, the joyous "Blessed be God, Alleluia" hints at Handel's most celebrated chorus some twenty-four years later.

Telemann *Essercizii musici: Trio Sonata in E-Flat Major, TWV 42:Es3 (1740)*

Telemann's mature chamber music illustrates how the dramatic sensibilities of an opera composer can influence works intended for amateur study and entertainment. Thus, "pure" music is transformed by some ineffable script to a dramatic work. Handel had the same predilection for representation in his sonatas. Telemann's Trio Sonata in E-Flat is a charming work infused with the playfulness, drama and decorum of a mute character piece. In the C-Minor *Mesto*, in particular, with its tragic frisson, the oboe sighs and pines for some unrevealed, unrequited love; the harpsichord and continuo, playing the role of Greek chorus, expostulate on the tragedy with a rocking, dotted motif. In the concluding *Vivace*, all is well again: with hunting horns ablare (or a-tinkled, by the harpsichord), our characters are now diverted by the pleasures of *La Chasse*.